NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER O. 5-5589 MARCH 8, 1978
LESUEUR

THE PANAMA CANAL DEBATE -- HOW MUCH LONGER?

ANNCR:

THE SENATE DEBATE ON RATIFICATION OF THE PANAMA CANAL TREATIES HAS ENTERED ITS FOURTH WEEK. TREATY SUPPORTERS HAVE SHOWN IMPATIENCE TO REACH A FINAL VOTE BUT NOW SEE SOME LIGHT ON THE HORIZON. VOA'S LARRY LESUEUR HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

ALMOST EVERYTHING THAT CAN BE SAID HAS BEEN SAID IN THE SENATE ON THE ISSUE OF RATIFYING THE TREATY OF PERMANENT NEUTRALITY OF THE PANAMA CANAL, ACCORDING TO ITS SUPPORTERS. SEEMINGLY CONFIDENT THAT THEY WILL HAVE THE 67 AFFIRMATIVE VOTES NEEDED TO RATIFY THIS TREATY THEY ARE ANXIOUS TO GET ON WITH THE SECOND TREATY GOVERNING THE OPERATION AND DEFENSE OF THE INTER-OCEANIC WATERWAY THROUGH 1999.

WITH OTHER IMPORTANT LEGISLATIVE BUSINESS PILED UP BEHIND THE CANAL TREATIES AND WITH THE THIRTY-THREE SENATORS WHO ARE UP FOR RE-ELECTION IN THE FALL EAGER TO GET HOME FOR THEIR ELECTION CAMPAIGNING, THE SENATE DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP HARDENED ITS APPROACH TOWARD THE TREATY DEBATE'S SNALE-LIKE PACE.

TO SPEED THE DEBATE, THE SENATE DEMOCRATIC LEADER-SHIP DIRECTED THAT THE SENATE STAY IN SESSION UNTIL EIGHT OR NINE O'CLOCK IN THE EVENING. THE RESULT WAS TO INCREASE A SENATOR'S WORK DAY TO ELEVEN OR 12 HOURS, WHICH IS NOT POPULAR WITH OLDER MEMBERS AND RUINOUS TO THE OUTSIDE ACTIVITIES OF ALL SENATORS. THE LEADERSHIP

ALSO RAISED THE SPECTRE OF SATURDAY SESSIONS IN ORDER TO EXPEDITE ACTION ON THE PANAMA TREATIES. AT THE SAME TIME, SENATE DEMOCRATIC LEADERS WARNED THAT UNLESS THE PROSPECT IMPROVED FOR COMPLETION OF ACTION ON THE PANAMA CANAL TREATIES BY THE SCHEDULED MARCH 23RD START OF THE TRADITIONAL EASTER HOLIDAY, THE RECESS PERIOD WOULD BE CUT FROM ABOUT TEN DAYS TO A JUST A LONG WEEKEND.

SENATE TREATY OPPONENTS THEN ABRUPTLY CHANGED THEIR TACTICS. THEY AGREED TO A FINAL VOTE ON MARCH 16TH ON THE TREATY THAT WOULD KEEP THE CANAL NEUTRAL WHEN CONTROL OF THE WATERWAY PASSES FROM THE UNITED STATES TO PANAMA AT THE END OF 1999.

BOTH SIDES BELIEVE THE VOTE WILL BE CLOSE -- WITHIN TWO TO FOUR VOTES EITHER WAY. PRO-TREATY FORCES THINK THEY HAVE 63 FIRM SENATE COMMITTMENTS TO APPROVE THE TREATIES, ANTI-TREATY SENATORS COUNT 30 SURE VOTES AGAINST. IT WILL TAKE 67 VOTES TO RATIFY THE TREATIES AND 34 TO BLOCK THEM IF ALL ONE HUNDRED SENATORS VOTE. (OPT) TREATY OPPONENTS HAVE NOT SAID WHEN THEY ARE PREPARED TO VOTE ON THE SECOND AND BASIC TREATY WHICH TRANSFERS CANAL CONTROL OVER THE NEXT 22 YEARS FROM THE U.S. TO PANAMA. BUT THEY STILL BELIVE THAT TIME IS ON THEIR SIDE, SUGGESTING THAT WHEN THE ONE-THIRD OF THE SENATE WHICH IS UP FOR RE-ELECTION HEARS FROM ITS CONSTITUENTS IT MAY CHANGE SOME PRO-TREATY ATTITUDES. (END OPT)

JS/PY